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Ritual, Movement, and African Dramaturgy as Anti-Colonial Archive: A Study of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

Hajarimayum Sadhana Devi

Faculty, South Asian Institute of Rural and Agricultural Management, Manipur, India

Abstract

This study examines how ritual, movement, and embodied performance in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi function as an anti-colonial archive. The play rejects the authority of written colonial records and builds a counter-archive grounded in African dramaturgy. The use of "Movements" rather than conventional acts marks a return to rhythmic and ceremonial structures found in African oral cultures. The play opens with rising drums and a mimed sequence of slavery, forced labour, and rebellion. This full-bodied performance reconstructs Black history without relying on text. The stage becomes a space where memory is carried through collective actions. Drawing on Paul Connerton's claim that social memory is stored in bodily practices, the study argues that the play treats the body as a historical document. The drumbeat acts as a mnemonic device, while freedom songs preserve political truths suppressed in colonial archives. Richard Schechner's theory of restored behavior helps frame these scenes as repeated acts that keep cultural memory alive. Decolonial archive theory further shows how the colonial state controls written evidence, erases Mau Mau testimony, and frames Kimathi as a criminal. The play answers this erasure by placing memory in movement, ritual, and embodied defiance. Kimathi's tortured body becomes evidence of state violence, while the Woman's agile movement across the city maps a living route of resistance. The Boy and Girl's bodily shift from fear to courage shows how political identity grows through shared action. The study argues that Ngũgĩ and Mugo build a new archive on stage one made of rhythm, song, gesture, and enactment. Through this form, the play restores suppressed histories and turns performance into a site of memory and liberation.

Keywords: performed memory; African dramaturgy; anti-colonial archive; bodily history; ritual movement

1. Introduction

Colonial rule in Kenya reshaped how history was recorded, stored, and remembered. Written archives produced by the British administration framed the Mau Mau movement as violent disorder rather than a struggle for land and justice. These archives silenced local memory, erased African testimony, and presented colonial violence as lawful authority (MacArthur, 2017). *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo challenges this system by rejecting the authority of written colonial records and restoring memory through African performance traditions. The play builds a counter-archive through ritual, drumming, song, and collective movement. It treats the stage as a living memory space rather than a site for passive storytelling.

This study reads the play through theories that show how memory survives outside written documents. Connerton (1989) explains that communities store memory in bodily practices such as ritual, gesture, and collective performance. These forms become durable records when formal archives deny or distort historical truth. Schechner (2003) argues that performance works as "restored behavior," meaning acts that hold and transmit memory through repetition. These ideas help frame the play's use of drums, chants, and mimed scenes as historical evidence. Alongside this, decolonial archive theory exposes how colonial power shapes what can be documented, preserved, and believed (Mbembe, 2001). When written archives are controlled by the state, oppressed groups build alternative systems of remembering through performance and oral tradition.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi uses these principles to rebuild Mau Mau history. The sequence titled "Black Man's History," performed through drums and choreographed movement, presents a timeline of slavery, forced labour, and rebellion. This scene acts as a living archive that replaces colonial texts with embodied testimony. The freedom songs and chants in the play hold memories of resistance, while the body of the performer becomes a record of pain, strength, and shared political identity. Through these choices, the play shifts its purpose from political commentary to the creation of an anti-colonial archive grounded in African dramaturgy. It restores suppressed histories by placing memory in movement rather than in the written page.

2. Theoretical Frame

This study draws on three connected bodies of theory: memory studies, performance theory, and decolonial archive theory. Together, they help show how *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* builds an anti-colonial archive through embodied action, ritual, and collective movement.

2.1 Memory Studies: The Body as a Vessel of Social Memory

Paul Connerton's work offers a key foundation for understanding how communities remember outside written records. Connerton (1989) argues that memory is preserved through bodily practices such as ritual, gesture, procession, and repeated community actions. These practices act as living containers of history. They store what official archives silence or deny. In colonised societies where written archives are shaped by state power, such embodied forms become central to the survival of cultural memory.

Connerton also explains that societies "re-enact" their past through performative acts (1989). These acts embed memory within the body. This idea helps analyse the play's mimed sequence of "Black Man's History," which reconstructs a long line of violence and resistance without relying on written text. It also supports the reading of freedom songs and chants as memory-bearing practices that hold the experiences of the Mau Mau movement across generations.

2.2 Performance Theory: Restored Behavior and the Archive of the Stage

Richard Schechner's performance theory strengthens this reading. Schechner (2003) describes performance as "restored behavior" acts repeated across time and carried from one generation to another. Restored behavior works like an archive. It preserves actions, gestures, and rhythms that hold historical meaning. Under this view, performance is not only representation but also a system of storing and transmitting memory.

This idea allows the play's dramaturgy to be read as an archive in motion. The drumming, the ritualised entry of performers, the choreographed depiction of enslavement and peasant struggle, and the cyclical structure of "Movements" become more than aesthetic choices. They become deliberate strategies to rebuild history through repeated, memory-filled actions. Through Schechner's lens, the stage transforms into a counter-archival space that reclaims memory from the written colonial record.

2.3 Decolonial Archive Theory: Breaking the Power of Colonial Documentation

The third theoretical strand comes from decolonial thought, which exposes the limits and violence of colonial archives. Achille Mbembe (2002) shows that the colonial archive is built on control control of evidence, of classification, and of narrative legitimacy. Written records produced under colonial rule reflect the interests of the state rather than the lived experiences of the colonised. This makes the archive a tool of erasure.

Decolonial archive theory argues that colonised people develop their own archives through oral culture, ritual, performance, and communal memory practices (Hamilton et al., 2002). These forms create alternative routes for

truth when written documents are shaped by coercion and racial hierarchy. This perspective is vital for understanding a play that openly rejects colonial court transcripts, police statements, and administrative records that defined the Mau Mau struggle as criminal rather than liberatory.

In this framework, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* becomes a deliberate act of archival reconstruction. It refuses the authority of the colonial courtroom, which stands for the written archive of Empire. It instead builds an anti-colonial archive grounded in performance through drums, song, and bodies that carry the marks of both oppression and resistance.

2.4 Integrating the Three Frames

Bringing these theories together gives a clear way to read the play. Connerton's ideas explain how memory lives in the body. Schechner shows how performance preserves and repeats that memory. Decolonial archive theory reveals why African communities must rely on embodied archives when written documents distort or erase their history.

The combined framework supports a reading of the play as a site where memory is preserved through movement, rhythm, and collective performance. It allows us to argue that the play does more than represent history: it becomes a living archive that challenges colonial documentation and restores suppressed narratives of the Mau Mau struggle.

3. Movements as Ritual Structure: Dramaturgy Beyond Western Acts

Ngũgĩ and Mugo reject the Western division of drama into "acts" and "scenes." Instead, they organise the play into "Movements," a choice that shifts the dramaturgy from literary convention to ritual form. This choice signals a move away from European dramatic architecture and toward structures shaped by African oral performance, communal ceremony, and rhythmic continuity. It reframes the play not as a text to be read but as a ritualised event that carries memory through repeated action, rhythm, and collective presence.

The term "Movement" echoes the pulse of African ceremony, where meaning emerges through cycles of rhythm, repetition, and physical flow. In many African performance traditions, events unfold through a sustained rise and release of energy rather than a fixed linear sequence (Ndigirigi, 2014). The structure of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* follows this principle. Each Movement gathers intensity through drums, chants, and group action, then transitions into another phase of the struggle. The energy does not reset. It accumulates, much like ritual.

This form aligns with Connerton's (1989) idea that societies store memory in ritual performance. Movements operate as memory frames. Each one holds specific acts of remembering: the history of slavery and forced labour; the immediate violence of colonial policing; the moral and physical strength of the resistance. The structure leads the audience through a sequence of embodied memories rather than a chronological plot. This design functions as a counter-archive because it restores a history suppressed in written colonial sources.

Schechner's theory of "restored behavior" supports this reading. Schechner (2003) explains that performance repeats actions that have been carried across generations. These repeated actions become cultural memory in motion. The play's Movements reflect this idea because each one stages a collective memory that returns through bodily performance: the rise of the drums, the mime of the "Black Man's History," and the movement of guerrillas across the forest and city. These are restored behaviors that act as vessels of social memory.

The choice of Movements also disrupts the authority of colonial narrative time. Colonial archives impose linear, administrative time a time of documentation, regulation, and legal procedure (Mbembe, 2001). The play's dramaturgy rejects that model. It works in cyclical, rhythmic time shaped by struggle and renewal rather than by

the courtroom's linear progression from charge to sentence. This returns narrative control to African temporal experience and frees the story from the colonial logic of documentation.

The Movements therefore do more than organise the play. They become acts of cultural reclamation. They draw from African ritual codes to break away from colonial narrative habits. They turn the stage into a communal space where memory is rebuilt through rhythm and embodied sequence. They guide the audience not through legal evidence but through performed history. In doing so, the Movements become a key part of the play's anti-colonial archive.

4. The Drums and the Mimetic Sequence as Performed History

The opening of the First Movement begins with distant drums that rise in intensity until they fill the stage. These drums do not serve as background sound. They act as markers of historical recall. In African performance traditions, the drum is a conduit of collective memory. It signals shared experience, calls communities into presence, and carries the rhythms of past events into the present moment (Barber, 2007). By starting the play with drums, Ngũgĩ and Mugo place the audience inside a ritual of remembering. The drumbeat becomes the first archive an audible record of communal history that predates colonial writing.

As the drums reach their peak, the play shifts into the mimetic sequence titled "Black Man's History." This sequence compresses centuries of African experience into a choreographed series of visual images: the deception of chiefs by slave traders, the march of chained captives, plantation labour under a brutal overseer, and the rise of anti-imperialist protest. The sequence is performed without spoken narration. The body becomes the main medium of memory. In Connerton's (1989) terms, this is a "bodily reenactment of the past," where society recalls its trauma and resistance through collective action rather than through textual record.

The sequence challenges the authority of the colonial archive. Colonial documents often framed African resistance as disorder, and African suffering as absence or silence (MacArthur, 2017). By staging these histories through movement, the play restores what the archive omits. The visual intensity of chained bodies, bent labourers, and defiant protestors exposes forms of violence that the written archive hides. This is an act of historical correction through performance.

Schechner's idea of "restored behavior" helps explain the power of this sequence. He notes that performance repeats stored actions that carry cultural memory (Schechner, 2003). In this sense, the mimed history functions as a restored behavior that reactivates collective memory. Each gesture of whipping, bending, resisting, or rising again carries the imprint of past generations. The performers' bodies hold the memory of those who endured slavery and colonial rule. Their movement becomes testimony.

The sequence also acts as a counter-narrative to colonial legal discourse. The courtroom in the play tries to fix Kimathi's history through a single charge about a firearm. The mimetic sequence shatters this narrow record by showing a broader historical arc. It places Kimathi within a long struggle for land, dignity, and survival. The play uses bodily movement to widen historical consciousness, shifting the audience from the courtroom's limited frame to a panoramic view of African resistance.

The drums and the mimed history therefore work together as a performed archive. The drums summon memory. The bodies that move across the stage restore erased histories. The sequence gives the audience access to a collective past that written colonial sources distort. It turns the stage into a memory space where history is preserved through rhythm, movement, and embodied storytelling. In doing so, it deepens the play's anti-colonial purpose and strengthens its role as a living archive.

5. Song as Testimony

Songs in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* act as carriers of memory and truth in a setting where the colonial court silences African voices. They serve as oral records that challenge the authority of written colonial documents. In many African societies, songs hold communal knowledge, historical reflection, and moral instruction. They preserve the experiences of a people across generations without dependence on written texts (Finnegan, 2012). The play uses this tradition to build an alternative route for testimony when colonial institutions refuse to hear African accounts.

The freedom songs sung by peasants, guerrillas, and urban characters function as forms of collective speech. They give voice to those who cannot speak in the courtroom, either because the law denies them a platform or because their experiences fall outside the narrow frame of admissible evidence. These songs reveal anger, grief, hope, and defiance. They record how ordinary people understood the struggle. In Connerton's (1989) terms, they are part of the society's "incorporating practices," where memory is carried in repeated cultural forms rather than in written narrative.

Songs also play a restorative role. They return dignity to the Mau Mau movement, which colonial propaganda labelled as "terrorist." Colonial government documents and settler newspapers often portrayed Mau Mau fighters as irrational or violent (Elkins, 2005). In contrast, the songs in the play cast them as freedom-seeking individuals with a shared sense of purpose. They testify to the moral logic behind the resistance. This creates a counter-testimony against the distortions of the colonial archive.

Performance theory strengthens this reading. Schechner (2003) notes that music and chant are key elements of restored behavior because they repeat patterns that carry emotional and historical weight. In the play, freedom songs return at key moments to connect present actors with past struggles. Each repetition intensifies the memory and binds the community together. The act of singing becomes both documentation and resistance.

Songs also challenge the formal space of the courtroom. While the Judge demands confession, silence, or guilt in fixed legal categories, the people outside respond with rhythm and voice. Their songs speak what the law refuses to hear. They offer a broader, more truthful archive that stretches beyond legal definitions. This contrast reveals the play's critique of colonial justice: written records and court testimony cannot contain the lived truth of oppression.

By treating song as testimony, the play restores memory to the people. It allows the oppressed to speak in their own terms, using their own forms. Song becomes a record of the past, a witness to the present, and a promise of future liberation. It is one of the central ways the play builds its anti-colonial archive. The voice becomes the archive. The rhythm becomes the evidence. The collective act of singing becomes a historical event.

6. The Body as Archive

The body in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* functions as a primary site of stored memory. It carries the marks of violence, labour, resistance, and collective identity. When colonial institutions attempt to control written records and legal evidence, the body becomes the place where truth survives. This aligns with Connerton's (1989) claim that societies rely on bodily practices and physical memory when dominant powers suppress or distort historical accounts. The play uses bodies moving, suffering, resisting to hold and transmit the experience of the Mau Mau struggle.

Kimathi's body carries the most direct inscription of colonial brutality. His wounds, chains, and weakened posture serve as physical proof of state violence. These marks become a form of testimony that the courtroom

refuses to acknowledge. Mbembe (2001) argues that colonial power works through the management and violation of African bodies. The play exposes this by showing how Kimathi's body becomes a document of torture and domination. Yet his refusal to break under pain turns his body into a symbol of endurance. It preserves the memory of resistance even when speech is denied.

The Woman's body also functions as an archive. Her movement across the city, her agility in disguise, and her ability to navigate danger embody the lived knowledge of struggle. She carries stories of hardship, loss, and survival. Her actions store memory in the form of practical skill and emotional resilience. This reflects Schechner's (2003) idea that performance relies on "restored behavior," where repeated actions carry cultural memory across time. Her journeys between prison, market, and forest map a physical route of resistance that written archives do not capture.

The Boy and Girl show how the body can shift from vulnerability to political agency. Their early movements reflect hunger, fear, and instability. As the play progresses, their bodies change in tone and intention. They develop steadiness, courage, and direction. Their transformation becomes a performed record of how political consciousness grows from lived experience. Their bodies store memories of urban exploitation and use them to guide new forms of collective action. This supports Connerton's (1989) idea that memory is not only cognitive but also learned through repeated gestures and social environments.

The colonial court attempts to impose a different kind of bodily writing—chains, confinement, forced stillness, and silence. This is the body as controlled document. The play resists this by filling the stage with bodies in motion: marching, singing, miming, resisting. Movement becomes an assertion of memory against the archive of domination.

By treating the body as an archive, the play challenges the authority of colonial documents. It shifts the focus from what is written to what is lived. The scars, rhythms, and movements of the performers become durable records of the struggle for freedom. Through this, the play restores buried histories and asserts the body as a truthful, resilient, and communal archive.

7. Counter-Archive vs Colonial Archive

The clash between embodied performance and written colonial documentation forms one of the central tensions in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The play exposes how the colonial archive functions as a system of control rather than a neutral store of truth. Court transcripts, administrative reports, and legal codes define Mau Mau resistance as criminal activity and reduce complex historical struggles to narrow charges. This reflects Mbembe's (2002) argument that colonial archives classify, silence, and reshape evidence according to the needs of imperial authority. In the play, the courtroom stands as the physical symbol of this archive. Its procedures, language, and structure insist on only one version of history: the version written and preserved by the colonial state.

Against this, the play builds a counter-archive grounded in ritual, song, movement, and collective performance. This archive challenges both the authority and the format of colonial documentation. While the colonial archive relies on fixed text, the counter-archive relies on embodied memory. It draws its authority from lived experience rather than administrative power. Hamilton et al. (2002) argue that alternative archives emerge when official archives fail to represent the experiences of the oppressed. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* reflects this pattern by offering performed memory where the written record is distorted or absent.

The colonial archive in the play reduces Kimathi to a legal category "possession of a firearm" erasing the wider history of land theft, violence, and exploitation. This narrow framing mirrors a broader colonial tendency to

document only what reinforces power (MacArthur, 2017). Yet the play resists this by staging the long arc of Black experience through the mimetic sequence of "Black Man's History," the repeated freedom songs, and the rhythms of the Movements. These forms preserve memory outside legal discourse. They make visible what the colonial archive hides.

The use of performance also exposes the limits of written evidence. The courtroom demands verbal confession, but the play elevates non-verbal forms drumming, movement, embodied resistance as more truthful modes of testimony. Song and gesture become evidence against the colonial system that refuses to hear African voices. This reflects Connerton's (1989) idea that communities under pressure rely on embodied practices to store memory when written sources lose credibility.

The contrast between the two archives becomes clear during Kimathi's trial. While the Judge reads from documents, the people outside sing. While the court asserts legal authority, the stage asserts lived experience. While the written charge narrows the story, the performance expands it. The courtroom tries to fix memory; the performance frees it. This inversion reveals the core argument of the play: colonial writing cannot contain the truth of the struggle, but performed memory can.

Through this clash, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* redefines what counts as an archive. It shifts authority from text to body, from courtroom to chorus, from legal evidence to collective ritual. The counter-archive becomes a form of historical justice. It restores the stories erased by the colonial archive and returns agency to those whose experiences were distorted or denied.

8. Conclusion

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi demonstrates how African performance can operate as a powerful anti-colonial archive. The play breaks away from colonial forms of documentation and restores memory through ritual structure, embodied movement, and collective voice. By rejecting the Western format of "acts" and adopting the cyclic energy of "Movements," the play creates a dramaturgy rooted in African temporal rhythms. It rebuilds history through repeated gestures, shared songs, and carefully choreographed sequences. These choices place memory in the body rather than in the text.

The drums and the mimetic sequence of "Black Man's History" show how performance can store histories that colonial archives suppress. Through movement and rhythm, the play compresses centuries of exploitation and resistance into a visual and sensory experience that counteracts the distortions of written colonial records. The freedom songs deepen this work. They provide a form of testimony for those excluded from colonial legal discourse. Their repetition carries memory across generations and strengthens communal identity.

The body stands at the centre of this archive. It becomes the record of pain, endurance, skill, and political awakening. Kimathi's wounds, the Woman's movement, and the Boy and Girl's transformation all act as physical memories that challenge the authority of the courtroom's written evidence. In this sense, the play aligns with Connerton's account of bodily memory and Schechner's theory of restored behavior while pushing back against the colonial archive's claim to truth, as described by Mbembe and Hamilton's collective.

The contrast between the stage as counter-archive and the courtroom as colonial archive underscores the play's wider critique of imperial power. Written documents and legal procedures attempt to fix history within narrow frames, but the play's performance practices open space for a broader and more truthful account of Kenyan struggle. Through ritual, song, and movement, the play restores silenced histories and reclaims the authority to define the past.

By treating performance as an archive, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* shows how African dramaturgy can resist colonial erasure and preserve collective memory. It demonstrates that the body, the drum, and the collective voice can serve as durable records when written archives fail. The play places the lived experiences of the oppressed at the centre of historical knowledge and affirms performance as a vital space for reclaiming the past.

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